



On Balance

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Words from Dr. Martha Stacker



WE PERSEVERE ASA STRONG CYF TEAM

There have been a lot of changes and updates in the Children, Youth, and Families (CYF) Division since the last issue before the pandemic. I am very thankful for the amazing CYF staff who have adapted and continued to provide high-level services to children, youth and families despite the challenges we have all faced. As families' and communities' needs have changed, so too has the way in which youth justice and child welfare has forever changed how we continue to best serve them. Here is a summary of SOME of the work we do every day that captures a glimpse into the world of the CYF Division.

CYF Division Strengths and Challenges

- Continually addressing racial disparities within the communities and institutional racism
- Navigating the pandemic and shifting to a virtual and hybrid work model
- Vacancies in social worker positions, which has been a statewide and national issue
- Onboarding new staff in a virtual/hybrid work environment
- Continued peer and formal support services of all staff in our hybrid working environment
- Continued functional daily operations at all sites (N.I.P, NPO, JCO, and SMO)
- We're resilient, flexible, and adaptable.
- We value and appreciate each other.

Child Protective Services (CPS) Strengths and Challenges

The focus for CPS in Dane County mirrors the focus of the Child Welfare Transformation in WI (Putting Families First [FFPSA Background | Wisconsin Department of Children and Families](#)):

- Strengthen local communities and build services to support families in their homes.
- Keep children in family settings whenever possible.

CPS has shifted resources to support the front end of our service and intervention continuum. In an attempt to devote more time to “closing the front door” we have:

- Reallocated three open CPS Ongoing positions to add two positions to our Access Unit (Phone Intake) and to add one position to our FACE Unit (Family And Community Engagement).
- In CPS Access, significant efforts are underway to shift the mindset of our mandated reporters (especially school staff, law enforcement, and the DA’s Office) away from mandated reporting and toward mandated supporting of children and families. We are providing monthly training opportunities to highlight the legal definitions of mandated reporting, legal definitions of child maltreatment in WI, and racial disparities in CPS that start at the point of reporting. We encourage people to think about community-based services and interventions that can better address the concerns being identified by reporters. Please contact Sue DeBuhr (debuhr@countyofdane.com) if you want information about Mandated Reporter Training.
- In the FACE Unit, we continue to provide voluntary intensive case management services to families at risk of re-referral for concerns of chronic neglect. Research is clear that neglect is closely tied with poverty, so efforts with families involved with FACE are focused on helping families find ways to meet basic needs and maintain stable housing. With the addition of another social worker we will be able to expand the scope of families that are served in the county. We have been pleased to wrestle with the dilemma of how long to stay involved with families, because the majority of families don’t want their case to be closed!
- In CPS Initial Assessment and Ongoing, staff are spending many hours discussing, crafting, and implementing safety plans to keep children in their parental homes or to return kids home as quickly as possible. We continue to identify gaps in the services and interventions needed to sustain safety plans and continue to reduce out of home care. The hope is to address some of the needs through the addition of staff who will provide direct services and interventions to families based on individualized assessment. This addition of staff is only possible because the State has identified a significant amount of funding to support all WI counties through Targeted Safety Support Funds [Targeted Safety Support Funds Worker Information \(wisconsin.gov\)](#).
- The CYF Social Service Specialists (SSS) and Transportation Aide have all located to Dane County Job Center and have become the SSS Unit. This includes the addition of the first ever SSS Supervisor. The unit is no longer physically bifurcated or supervised by multiple CPS

Supervisors. The goal is to also add a Lead SSS to further assist with this significant transition.

- Finally, CPS Permanency and Independent Living staff continue to support cases moving toward permanency options other than Reunification. Children continue to experience permanency through Subsidized Guardianship and staff are available to provide post-permanency support as needed. Older youth in out-of-home care receive intensive support around building informal support systems that will provide emotional permanency, and they are connected with concrete resources to support them in the areas of housing, education, employment, and more.

Youth Justice (YJ) Strengths and Challenges

- We have adopted a new risk and needs assessment tool the YASI <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/cwportal/yj/pdf/yasi-plan.pdf>. This is a standardized tool that has been adopted by all counties in Wisconsin and helps inform what types of services can best meet a youth's needs and also assists with case planning.
- Added an additional YJ Supervisor and restructured/realigned accordingly. This further included expansion from five to six Youth Justice units.
- Developed and hired two YJ Lead social workers with two more in progress.
- Developed and hired two Youth Justice Coordinators (one to serve 10-16 year-olds and the other to serve 17-25 year-olds).
- Municipal Court Diversion programming - Expanded Restorative Justice (RJ) interventions to Middleton and Cross Plains. This is in addition to Madison and Sun Prairie where we have offered these services for several years.
- In 2022, we began new RJ programming for youth referred to our Court Diversion unit on misdemeanor charges.
- In 2022, we developed an in-house mentoring program for YJ-involved youth. We have hired three of six youth worker mentors. They will provide support for up to 36 youth.
- A variety of construction projects at our Neighborhood Intervention Program building. This is wrapping up soon and will certainly be a positive for staff as well as consumers.
- Substantial and regular increases in Corrections daily rates over the last couple of years, which has more than doubled the cost to serve youth in those facilities. This is a statewide concern.
- Continued issues around car thefts in our community involving youth (although 2020 and 2021 numbers did decrease).
- Increased issues around guns in the community and shots fired incidents. We continue to monitor, attend collaborative meetings, and look at implementations of preventative provisions to these incidents

Office Support Staff (OSS) Strengths and Challenges

- OSS provided uninterrupted services to clients via walk-in's, phone calls, or visitations during the pandemic.
- Rendered uninterrupted support services to social workers, social service specialists, supervisors, and others within DCDHS.
- We maintained and continue to operate the DCDHS offices during the COVID pandemic by coming into the offices.
- Each of us strives to execute the workload as to create a conducive and safe workplace.
- Execute tasks outside of our routine functions with effectiveness and efficiency.
- Assisted with office moves and relocations to various CYF sites.
- Concerned about burnout and work functions due to staff transition.

Plain and simple, thank you CYF team. Remember to take care of yourselves mentally, spiritually, and/ or physically before others in all of your dedication. I deeply appreciate every member of this team for showing relentless effort and commitment. It gives me great pride to be a part of this group of magnificent CYF staff and the community we serve. I see, respect and appreciate everything you do. Your hard work continues to inspire me.

Onward.....

Martha Stacker, Ph.D.

Judge Colás to Retire

By John Bauman

After nearly 15 years on the bench, Judge Juan Colás will be retiring on December 16, 2022. Judge Colás was in the civil/family division of the Dane County Judiciary from 2008 until his move to the juvenile division in 2017 and was also the drug court judge beginning in 2013 until a few years ago. He has been in the juvenile division since 2017.

Prior to becoming Judge, he served as Legal Counsel to Governor Tony Earl, then four years as an Assistant Public Defender in the Milwaukee Adult Trial Office, then 16 years as an Assistant Attorney General in the Wis. Department of Justice, in the Medicaid Fraud Control Unit prosecuting provider fraud and later in the Criminal Litigation Unit handling white-collar crime, Ch. 980 (Sexually Violent Person Commitments) and criminal appeals.

Judge Colás said that it was a difficult decision, made more so because he has very much enjoyed working with staff in the various programs, but it was time to retire. The judge's fair and very thoughtful decision-making will be missed, and we all wish him the best in this next step of his life.

Judge's Corner

By Judge Everett Mitchell

This week a juvenile inspired me! While I am easily inspired by many of the talented and often triumphant young siblings that come through our court system, one young woman brought me to tears, laughter and sheer joy. What did she do you ask? She wrote a song. Yes, a song. A song that was written, produced, and performed with her life intertwined between every beat, lyric, and hook. I, along with the entire courtroom, paused to listen to her voice reminding us that she has a vision for her life and the opportunity to overcome every struggle lies within her. After the last beat concluded, we clapped our hands, and she cracked a soft smile. I knew she felt that moment of positive energy. We were proud. But, most importantly, you could feel that she was proud, too. I recently learned that she entered the song into a competition and received third place. Although, after listening to the other submissions, she should have easily won top prize. In our hearts, she is a shining number one.

Each day, the challenge of our work is to find those little nuggets of inspiration that lies within the youth, families, and siblings that enter our court system. Often, the most visible things we see and respond to are the actions which brought an individual to our attention. While we are working with a person or family, we must always strive to find that one piece of a spark that can assist us with connecting with a part of them that may lay dormant. I still remember one of my judicial mentors guiding me through a social worker's report. He was combing through it just looking for one thing to discuss with the youth before they entered the courtroom. When he found that one thing, he highlighted it and waited until that right moment to ask, "So tell me, what you love to cook?" The question changed each time, but the reaction was just as powerful, each time.

From time to time, despite the strain and stress of our work, take some time to remember there is a beat and a verse in every one that comes across your path. Some may never transform their life into a song. But the magic is in them knowing that we are listening and will celebrate with them every step of the way.

Peace



Youth Program Spotlight: YJ Garden Program

By Choua Her

It's time to get growing! This summer, teens in the Youth Justice program received paid employment opportunities thanks to a Partners in Equity (PIE) grant awarded to Extended Hands Food Pantry. When a local farmer who donates fresh produce to the pantry needed extra assistance to keep up with his large garden, pantry founders Jenifer and Andy Czerkas applied for the grant to employ youth for this work.

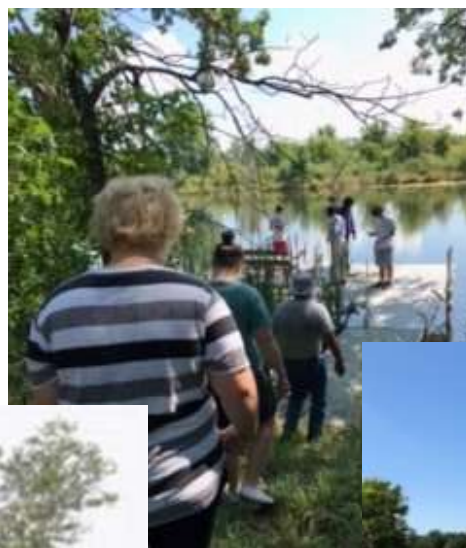
DCDHS Program Leader Choua Her and Social Worker Cheryl Bradley led weekly work crews of youth ages 12 and up. Youth employees assisted with weeding, fertilizing, watering, and harvesting produce, most of which was donated to Extended Hands Food Pantry. Along with learning agricultural skills, youth were taught necessary job skills and many gained their first employment experience.

Twenty youth participated in the program, working a total of 330 hours. Michael, 17, worked every available shift and was described by Program Leader Her as a great worker. When asked why he kept coming back, Michael said, "I like to work with my hands and be outside." Michael's favorite job was one most youth disliked – spreading lake weeds as compost.

Parker, 13, also enjoyed the work and having something to do with his time. "I was happy to be out of the house, earning some money, and also meeting new people," Parker said.

The PIE Grant Program, administered by the Dane County Office for Equity and Inclusion, supports community groups that can use the funding to address systemic racial inequities in the criminal justice system, such as in employment.

"Overall, it was a great opportunity for the kids to connect with each other and learn how things grow," says Her.



Independent Living Services

By Charlie Larson

The Independent Living Services (ILS) team provides essential support to youth living in out-of-home care. Adolescence is a critical time for gaining knowledge and skills to prepare for the independence of young adulthood. ILS social workers help youth in placements so they receive the guidance and support they need to prepare for transition out of care.

ILS workers educate and support youth with:

- Education
- Career planning
- Employment
- Financial literacy
- Housing
- Maintaining a home
- Transportation
- Understanding medical coverage and care
- Healthy choices
- Obtaining personal documents
- Developing connections to supportive adults and community resources

ILS services are completely voluntary, and youth voice and choice is central to the planning process.

Supervised Independent Living

A new, emerging court-ordered placement option that ILS workers have been supporting is Supervised Independent Living (SIL). This type of court-ordered placement recognizes youth 17 and older need the opportunity to practice independence before they graduate high school and leave care. Youth with an IEP can choose to remain in high school from ages 18-21 and are able to access SIL as long as they are attending a high school program. SIL allows youth to practice life skills while having a soft place to land when extra support is needed.

SIL is very individualized and offers opportunities to support youth in extremely creative ways, such as in renting a room or sharing an apartment with a peer. In all SIL placements, youth play an active role in developing their placement setting and potential roommate. If certain criteria are met, DCDHS can use money that would have gone toward a traditional out-of-home placement to pay the youth's portion of rent and other living expenses.

Youth agree to work with a supportive provider who is paid to assist them with daily living skills, budgeting, problem-solving, conflict resolution, and more. The provider is on call 24/7 by phone and is in contact with the youth a minimum of twice per week – although we are finding that youth need a lot of support from providers, especially during the first few months in their SIL placement.

“This past summer I became a Supervised Independent Living provider. I am so impressed with this program, which pairs a balance of independence and support for the young adults participating. As young adults turn 18, we know they value their freedom, but sometimes they still need the support of an adult to be the most successful version of themselves. In my role, I am able to listen to how hard it is to be an adult, offer advice or support, and, when needed, light a fire for motivation! I have seen my young adult face the challenges of working, navigating a roommate, and planning for her long-term employment goal, and I am so proud of the progress she has made. When we first met, I could see my role was to provide stability and consistency and help her build a foundation for her new independent life. As we move forward, I have seen her take on more responsibilities, and I like to think it is because she knows I will be there to support her and cheer her on. Having her own home gives her the right amount of freedom to be an adult, and having a provider gives her the right amount of support to keep making progress.” – Whitney Fowler

Youth who may have faced additional hardships because they were struggling in a family foster home or group home setting have found a lot of success with SIL placements. One example is a youth who is living in an apartment with a roommate, working, and making plans to attend Madison College, paid for by MMSD’s “Campus Connect” program. This 18-year-old is now on a lease and building rental history, and she recently volunteered to teach younger youth how to cook at an ILS group.

The ILS team is hopeful that there will be more opportunities for success in SIL placement. Creativity and flexibility are essential to keep our youth engaged and supported and honor their need for self-determination.

Contacts for Independent Living Services:

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Holiday Host a Family

By Nikki Sanders

Employee Group 2634 is gearing up for the upcoming holiday season and is once again sponsoring the Holiday Host a Family Program!! The Host a Family Program (HAF) supports Dane County families who are working with a Dane County Social Worker (SW) . This gift program helps families fulfill basic household needs as well as the needs and wants (dreams) of the children in the home. **Last year this program supported over 200 families!**

If you are a DCDHS SW working with a family with extreme needs, please consider referring them to this program.

Please fill out the attached referral form in full. The form is intended to focus on the needs/dreams of the child (ages 0-18), but we have also included the needs of the household (rather than individual adults). If you list a gift card option, also please list a secondary item as the hosts for this program are always eager to purchase needed items!

Please hand in your referrals as soon as possible as most matches have already occurred

****Please send all HAF referrals to Shelly Gnewikow (typed & emailed) as soon as you complete them!**

Referrals turned in **by 11/18/21** will be given priority.

If you are interested in becoming a “Host” for the HAF program, please let Shelly Gnewikow or Heather Soehle know! This program has continued to be a huge success year after year due to those willing to become “hosts” for the program’s family referrals! There are several ways to participate in this program from becoming a host to a full family referral (size of your choice), donating gift cards and/or other monetary donations for last minute shopping needs for those referrals that come in closer to the holiday! Reach out to Shelly Gnewikow or Heather Soehle with any questions!

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